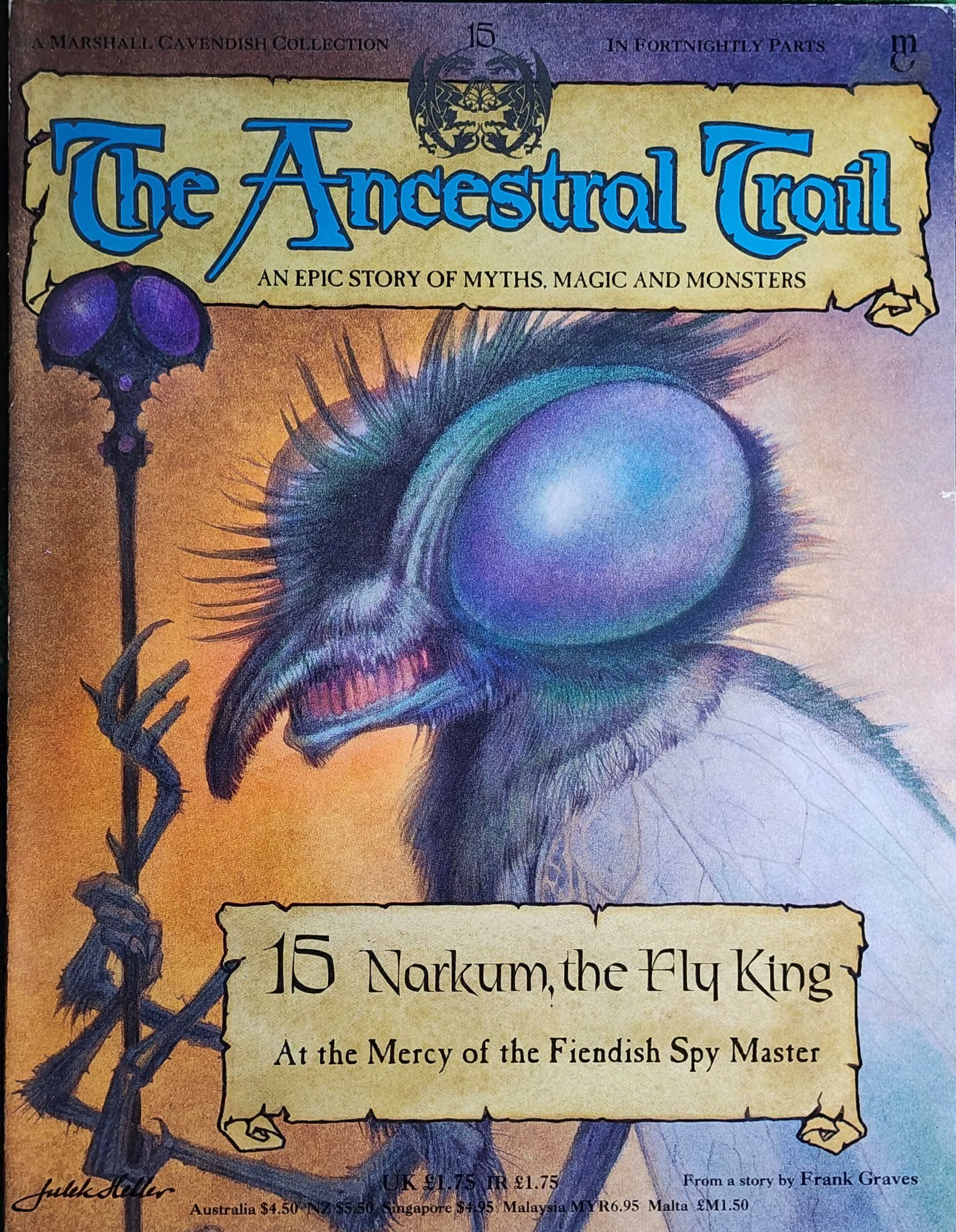
A MARSHALL CAVENDISH COLLECTION 15 IN FORTNIGHTLY PARTS

The Ancestral Trail

AN EPIC STORY OF MYTHS, MAGIC AND MONSTERS



15 Narkum, the Fly King

At the Mercy of the Fiendish Spy Master

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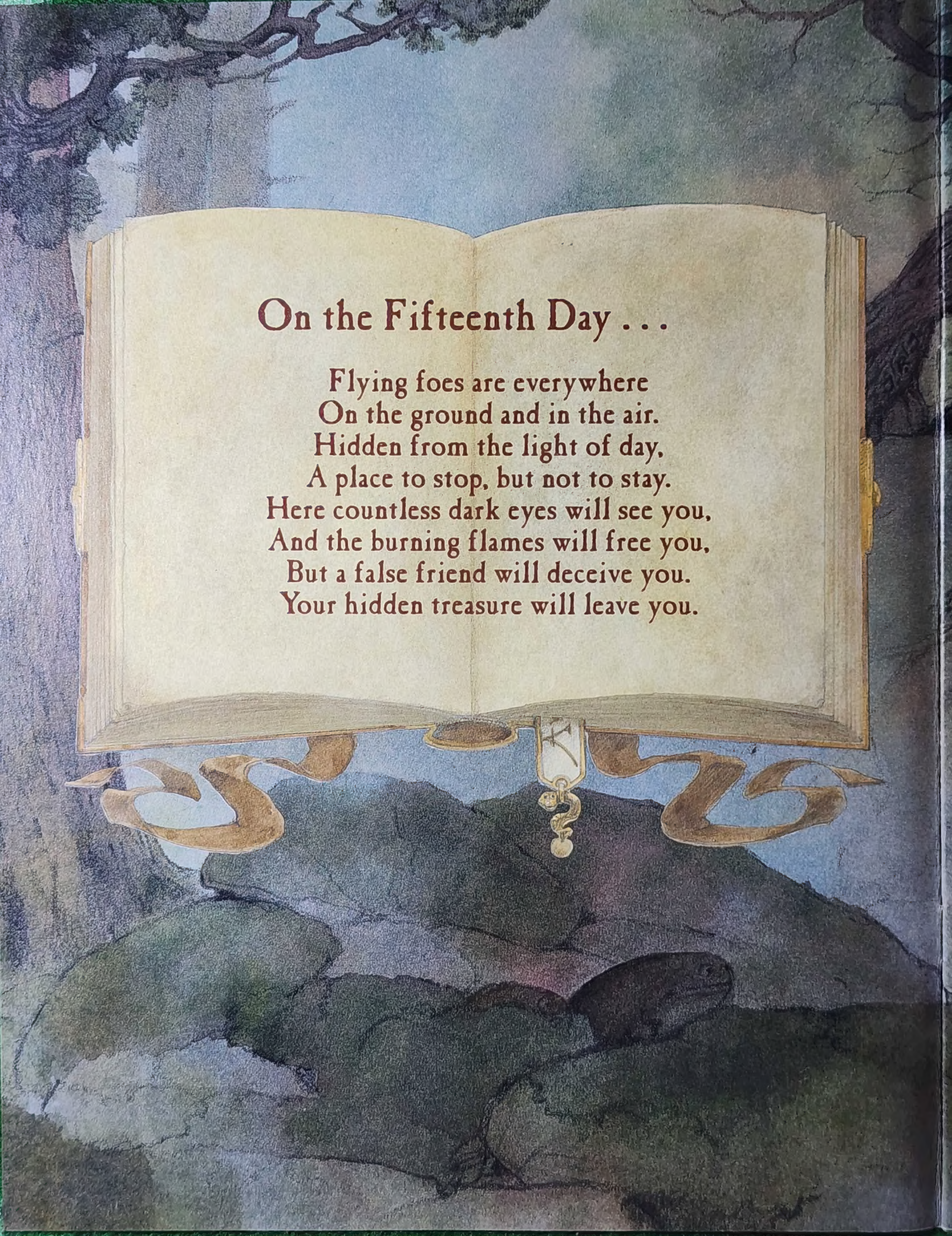
From a story by Frank Graves

Julek Heller



On the Fifteenth Day . . .

Flying foes are everywhere
On the ground and in the air.
Hidden from the light of day,
A place to stop, but not to stay.
Here countless dark eyes will see you,
And the burning flames will free you,
But a false friend will deceive you.
Your hidden treasure will leave you.

In desperation Richard, Orkan and Melek ran for the forest. They had to find cover fast – the Grapfrits' drone was reaching fever pitch. They reached the trees just in time, but there was nowhere to hide.

Gnarled trunks rose like tortured limbs from the bare earth and staggered into the gloomy distance. Behind the fleeing trio, the Grapfrits' drone took on a deeper note. The swarm had entered the forest.

Richard had all but given up hope when he spotted a dark chink at the base of a large tree. The three made for it, thinking there might be somewhere to hide amongst the tangled roots.

To their amazement, they found a small door, set into the roots which had made their way up through the earth and were exposed to the air. It was old and mildewed, and the surrounding timbers sagged in all directions. It was their only possible refuge, so Richard pushed on the door to see if it would open. It was stuck fast. Then Orkan threw his weight against it and the door slowly creaked open. The three piled through the doorway and pressed themselves into the shadows.

Outside, the Grapfrits buzzed their way between the tree trunks. With their poor sight, they did not see the three duck silently through the ancient door.

Blind pursuit

The Grapfrits heard no movement at all and, to them, this meant that their prey had moved on. They picked up speed and screamed past the hideout like a meteor shower, pursuing the figments of their own imaginations.

Behind the door, the three waited until the drone had died away before they dared move. Richard let out his breath in a gasp.

"We were lucky there," Richard said, "but we'd best stay put for a while in case they come back for a second sweep."

He looked around. It was dark inside the tree, and far bigger than it had seemed from the outside. Then he noticed a glow coming from deeper inside the tree, and a smell that reminded him of rotting meat.

"On second thoughts, we don't want to hang around any longer than we have to," Richard said louder than he had meant to. "We'll have a quick look at the prophecy, then move on."

Melek carried the book over to the door, which let in just enough light for them to read the faded text. Richard thought about

the words for a moment, but they did not seem to help much.

The flying foes were obviously the Grapfrits, but what the riddle meant about them being on the ground as well as the air, Richard could not fathom. He had a shrewd idea who the treacherous friend referred to, although without any hard evidence he hesitated to make an accusation. One line certainly did make perfect sense.

"A place to stop but not to stay fits this hovel down to the ground. It's time to leave," Richard told the others.

They pulled at the door, which seemed to be smaller than any of them could remember. As they pulled harder, it seemed to shrink further still, making the tree even darker than it already was.

Monstrous fly

"I don't think you want to leave just yet." The harsh words came from deep in the bowels of the tree, causing the three to spin round in terror.

Peering into the gloom, they realized the voice came from behind the glow. Then they saw an enormous fly. Its blue-green body was partially covered with a forest of thick, black hair. Its arms ended in sharp claws. A thin tongue

licked horribly from the black funnel of its mouth. Everything about the creature exuded darkness except for its eyes – they were enormous and sparkled with myriad prisms that seemed to reflect light from an uncanny depth. Staring at them, Richard had the impression that they held images not just of the room they were in, but of places very far away.

Hypnotic effect

Richard felt that if he looked into the eyes too long, he would be sucked into a crystalline maze where nothing existed save flashing pictures of a distant world. He tore his gaze away, distracted by another glimmer of light. It came from a sceptre that the fly gripped in one of its black talons. The rod's elaborately carved head was encrusted with jewels cut to resemble its owner's eyes. They glinted and shone in the firelight as the fly casually turned the rod in its claw.

The three gaped spellbound at the apparition before them. Now and then, a small cloud of flies flew up to

the hideous creature, communicating with it in a high-pitched buzzing before disappearing into the darkness. Richard was reminded of a general receiving reports from the battlefront. The monstrous fly sat impassively as it held the trio in its gaze. Richard shook himself to break the spell.

"Come on! Let's cut our way out of here!" he said, drawing his dagger and turning to the door.

Living cloak of flies

As the three headed for freedom, the giant fly raised its sceptre. Instantly, a thick cloud of flies descended on them. The trio fought valiantly against the onslaught, but it was an impossible task.

For every few flies they managed to swat, hundreds more took their place. The air was black with insects, when Richard suddenly thought of the cloak Golan had given him. Invisibility was perhaps the only way out.

He drew the hood over his head and experienced the familiar blurring sensation before his sight cleared. This time, the old magic failed. While Richard himself became invisible, his figure was clearly outlined because of the thousands of flies which clung to him. He looked at his hand. It was covered in a living glove of flies. The air grew thicker by the second, and soon the three companions were completely enclosed in a solid block of black bodies.

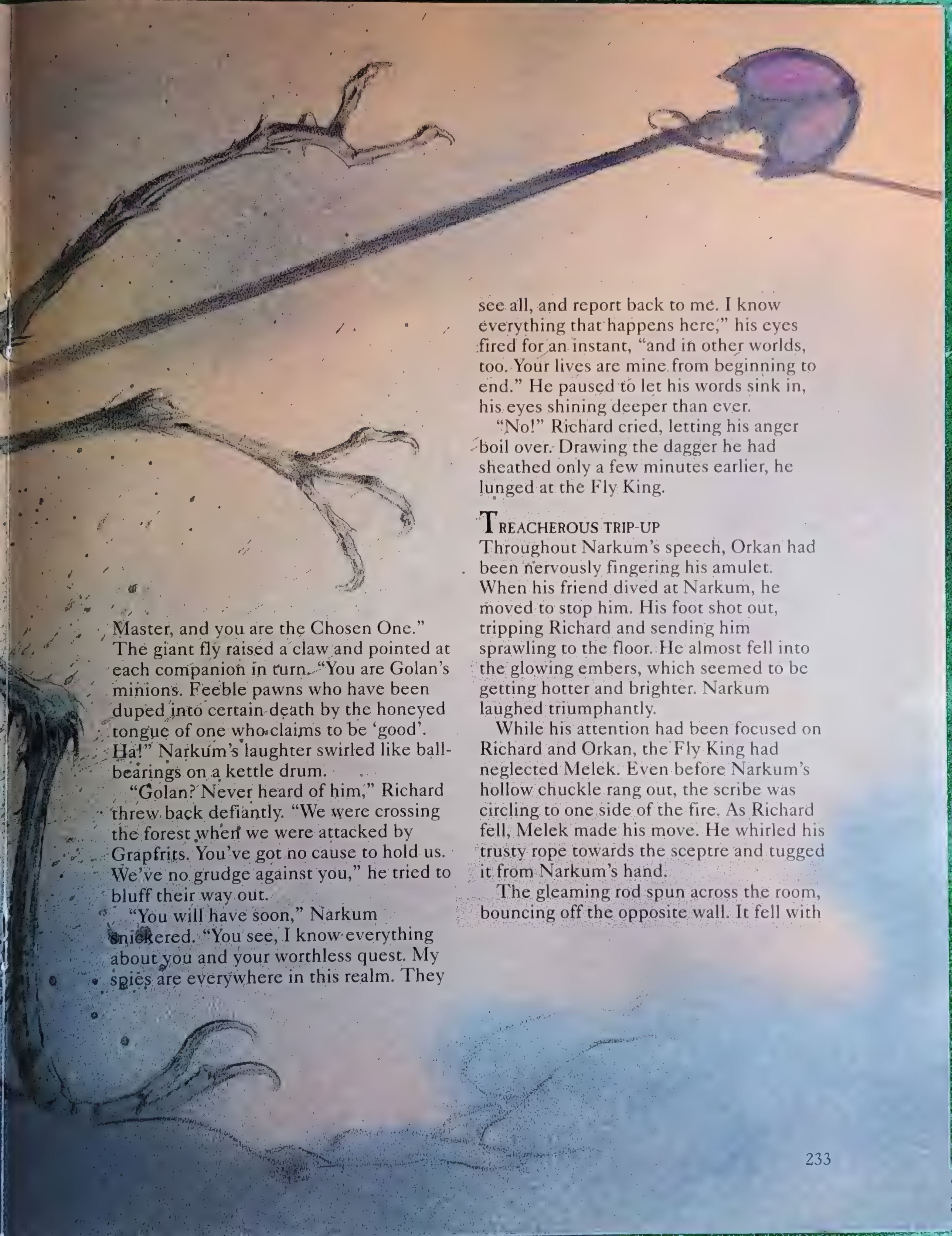
"Come closer." The rough voice reached the trio indistinctly. At the same time, the flies withdrew, opening a path which led to the dark figure on the other side of what they now saw were glowing embers. It raised a claw and beckoned them forward. Richard flung back his hood and shimmied back into sight.

Evil spymaster

"Come closer," the giant fly beckoned, wielding its sceptre again. From behind, a cloud of smoke formed into a flying fist that gently urged them on.

"Who are you?" Richard demanded. "What do you want with us?"

"I am Narkum, the Fly King and Spy



Master, and you are the Chosen One." The giant fly raised a claw and pointed at each companion in turn. "You are Golan's minions. Feeble pawns who have been duped into certain death by the honeyed tongue of one who claims to be 'good'. Ha!" Narkum's laughter swirled like ball-bearings on a kettle drum.

"Golan? Never heard of him," Richard threw back defiantly. "We were crossing the forest when we were attacked by Grapfrits. You've got no cause to hold us. We've no grudge against you," he tried to bluff their way out.

"You will have soon," Narkum sniekered. "You see, I know everything about you and your worthless quest. My spies are everywhere in this realm. They see all, and report back to me. I know everything that happens here," his eyes fired for an instant, "and in other worlds, too. Your lives are mine from beginning to end." He paused to let his words sink in, his eyes shining deeper than ever.

"No!" Richard cried, letting his anger boil over. Drawing the dagger he had sheathed only a few minutes earlier, he lunged at the Fly King.

Treacherous trip-up

Throughout Narkum's speech, Orkan had been nervously fingering his amulet. When his friend dived at Narkum, he moved to stop him. His foot shot out, tripping Richard and sending him sprawling to the floor. He almost fell into the glowing embers, which seemed to be getting hotter and brighter. Narkum laughed triumphantly.

While his attention had been focused on Richard and Orkan, the Fly King had neglected Melek. Even before Narkum's hollow chuckle rang out, the scribe was circling to one side of the fire. As Richard fell, Melek made his move. He whirled his trusty rope towards the sceptre and tugged it from Narkum's hand.

The gleaming rod spun across the room, bouncing off the opposite wall. It fell with

a fragile clatter, several of the jewelled eyes shattering on impact. Immediately the swarms of flies dropped to the floor, where they lay on their backs buzzing helplessly.

Richard looked around. The air had suddenly cleared, the door was open. A black carpet of flies covered the floor.

Burning gaze

Richard's eyes locked with Narkum's. Every colour in the spectrum flashed across the Fly King's all-seeing orbs. Visions of eternity clashed and collided, before being replaced by a deep-seated fire of hatred. The reflection of the embers expanded into a fierce, ruby light that was aimed directly at Richard. He ducked, as if to avoid a laserbeam.

Behind him, a wooden pole charred and cracked under Narkum's gaze. There was no escape from this one, Richard realized. They had to kill the Fly King, or at least destroy his power.

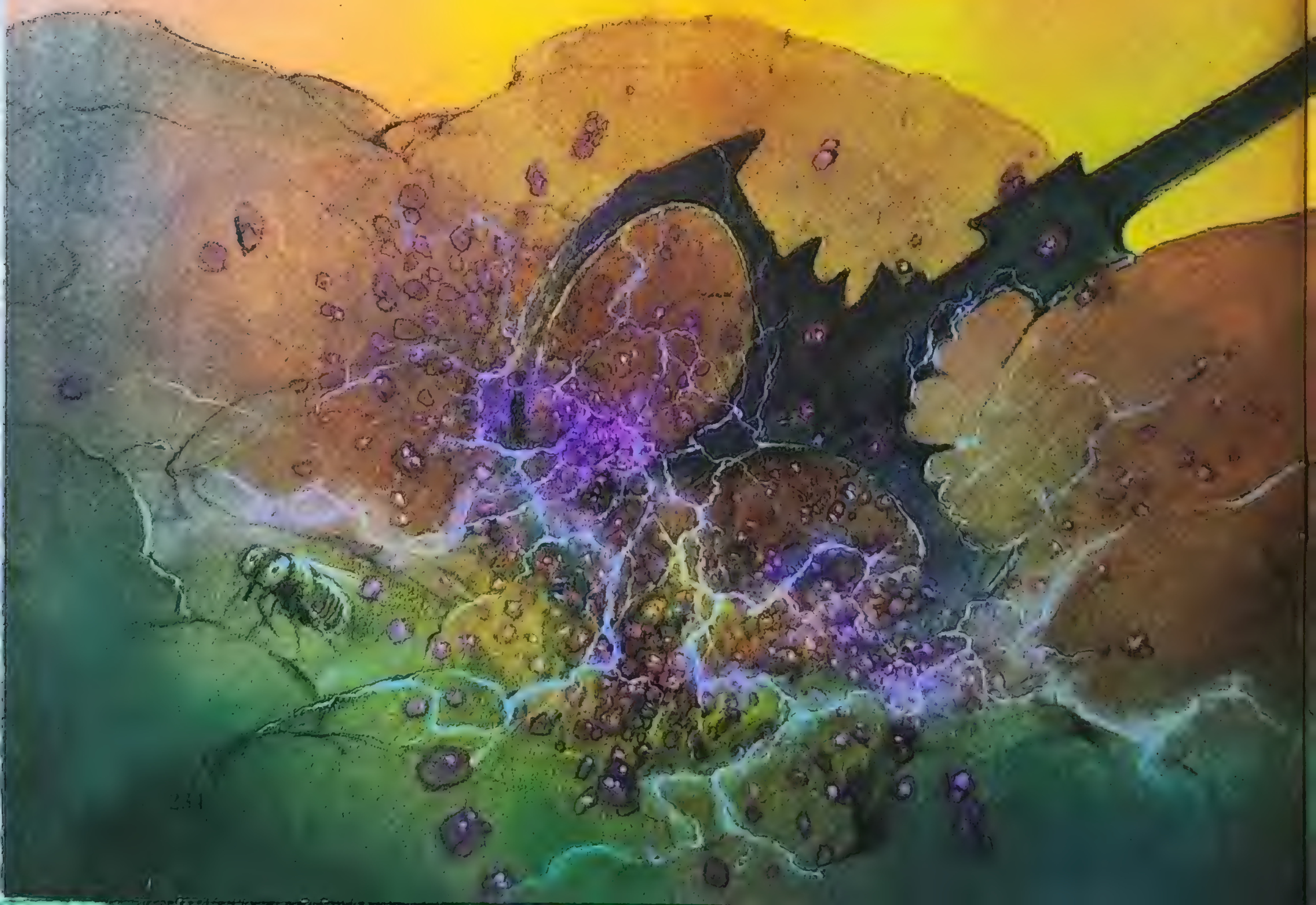
"Get the sceptre!" he shouted to Orkan, who was the nearest. "Throw it on to the fire."

Orkan was moving in a daze. The amulet's spell held him again, and his only thought was to save his own skin. He stumbled towards the door.

Melek rushed to block Orkan's way. He snatched the lumbering warrior's sword from his hands and darted back to the fallen sceptre. Instinctively, he knew not to pick it up in his hands. Instead, he used Orkan's sword to flip it into the glowing embers.

Narkum's voice cracked in a screech of fear as he saw his precious sceptre heading towards the flames. He scurried forward to save it. His black talon stretched into the embers to snatch back the sceptre.

Narkum's claw closed around its prize,



but in his moment of victory the jewelled rod caught fire. A sheet of flame lit up the room, filling the farthest corner with unaccustomed brightness. Narkum stood transfixed, a starburst radiating from his outstretched arm. Then the flames took hold, lapping greedily over his whole body.

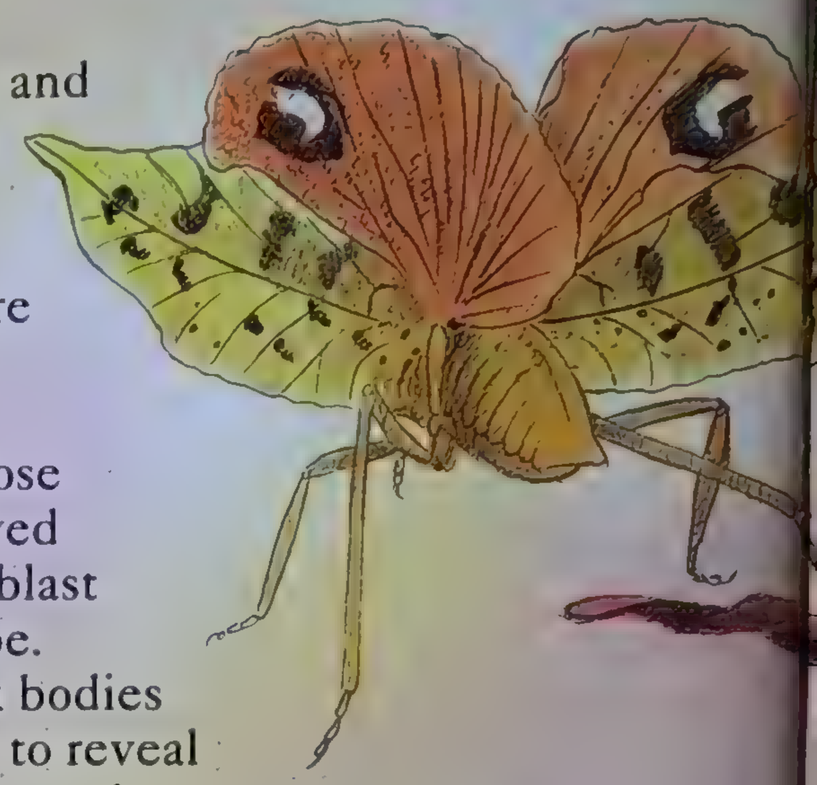
Demise of a spy

For a moment, Narkum's fathomless eyes stared at Melek through the flames. Then the fire licked upwards and their glassy surface blackened and cracked, emitting delicate popping noises as their secrets disappeared into oblivion.

Richard ran for the door, followed closely by Melek. Orkan was already half-way through. After them crawled a carpet of flies, too weak to fly, but alert enough to sense that if they stayed inside, they would surely die.

Outside, the trio flung themselves to the ground. At the same time Narkum's body exploded. It did so with a boom that sent hurricane blast-waves sweeping through the farthest reaches of the forest. The tree disintegrated in a shower of soft wood that sprayed harmlessly over Richard and his friends. Many of the flies, being lighter and weaker, were flattened against nearby trees, their lives ending in stains of yellow-white gore that dripped slowly to the ground.

Richard stood up and looked around him in astonishment. The remnants of Narkum's army were undergoing an extraordinary transformation. Those flies that had survived the flames and the blast were changing shape. Their twisted black bodies were splitting open to reveal beautiful, multi-coloured insects, which grew bigger by the second, unfurling wide wings that shone with a pearly glow in the forest gloom. The sound of their old skins being sloughed off filled the air with a steady



crackle, as if someone were walking through dead leaves. All around him Richard saw antennae twitching, limbs stretching and wings testing the air.

One of the larger insects approached Richard and stared at him intently through eyes that reflected all the colours in the rainbow. Strangely, Richard felt not the slightest bit afraid. He stood his ground while the creature before him finished its inspection.

"You must be the Chosen One," it said.

"What you see before you is all that remains of the insect race that used to inhabit this world. When the Evil One sent Narkum here, we battled hard but it was useless. His power was too great. Many of us died and those who survived became his spies. We were his eyes and ears, keeping track of everything that went on. Bit by bit, we watched the forces of Good being destroyed, but there was nothing we could do, until you came. We are in your debt."

Richard absorbed the news, then asked gently, "Do you have any information that could help us?"

"Not really. Events move too fast here. In the time since your arrival, anything could have happened. Whatever I told you would be out of date, and you might walk into danger. I can say that many of those who have escaped the Evil One's power have made their way back to the Ancestral City to await your return."

Richard's mission seemed to take on an even greater urgency. "Will you be joining forces with the other survivors in the Ancestral City?" he asked.

"Yes," the creature replied. "There's no time to waste. Good luck to you."

Flight formations

The insect raised one arm in salute, then turned to its companions. Now he spoke in a language that Richard could not understand, ordering his followers into squadrons and flights.

The insect forces took off, chirring the air with their wings. They hovered briefly above the ruined tree before darting off in orderly formations.

Richard watched until the last set of glowing wings was obscured by trees. Silence descended on the forest. A strange sense of depression fell on him. He

reached for Golan's amulet, hoping that it would give him some comfort. It was gone. Richard searched his pockets and patted his clothes with mounting desperation.

"The amulet!" he shouted. "It's gone. We must find it."

Back into the flames

"I saw it," Orkan spoke in deadpan tones, as if drugged. "It's in there. Narkum has it, and you can never get it back."

Richard stared at the smouldering trunk. The flames had died down, but the embers still glowed with a fierce heat. He had to find the amulet.

Ignoring Melek's pleas, he strode into the red-hot ruins. He could see places where it was safe to walk, or he thought he could. At his third step, the ground flared beneath him in a splash of fire.

Shoomi's Sanctuary

Come into this ancient domain and use your powers of observation to find . . .

Shoomi and Shoobi

Look out for these friendly little creatures again. They are hiding somewhere in the illustrations in this issue.

In issue 14, Shoomi and Shoobi were hiding behind a tree on page 224.

Monsters and Magic

Read about the Furies and Nomatotlos on Morbane's story cards. Which of these characters do you think Narkum is based on?

In issue 14, Hulkan was based on Lakyan.

Life Force Pod

Did you spot the clue on page 224? Richard had found the Pod of Justice in Cobra's Keep.

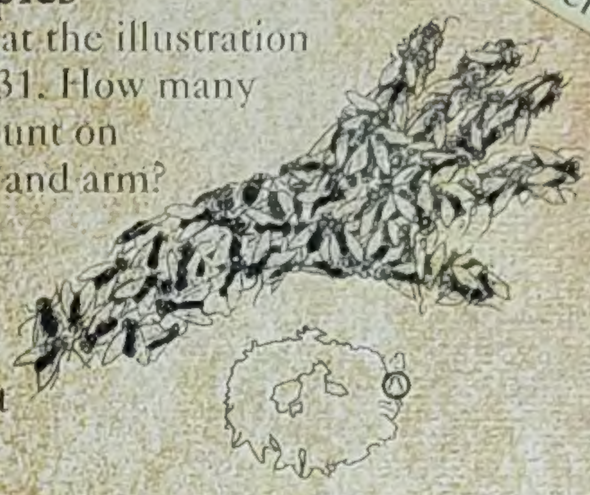
The Ancestral Trail

Cut off the first section of the role-playing game instructions, fold in half and keep it safe. The final section will be given in issue 16.

3-Minute Challenge

Narkum's Spies

Look carefully at the illustration on pages 230-231. How many flies can you count on Richard's hand and arm?



In issue 14, the worm-infested warrior was joining the right side the wall.

Random Challenge

For two players, using Monster Might cards and one dice.

Aim

For one player to hold all the cards.

Before you start

Divide cards into Good and Evil suits and remove Pods. Both players throw the dice. Highest scorer chooses Good or Evil suit cards and is first to call the category for combat.

How to Play

1 Both players shuffle cards and place them face-down in front of them.
2 First player calls the category for combat.
3 Both players turn over top cards and compare the Megatron Power ratings in this category.
4 Player with higher rating wins and places both cards at the bottom of his pack.
5 If Megatron Powers are the same, throw the dice for another category for combat.

1 Good/Evil 2 Size 3 Strength
4 Magic 5 Trickery 6 Weapons.

6 Play continues with players taking turns to call the category for combat, until one player holds all the cards.

The game can also be played by four players in two teams, dividing cards between them.

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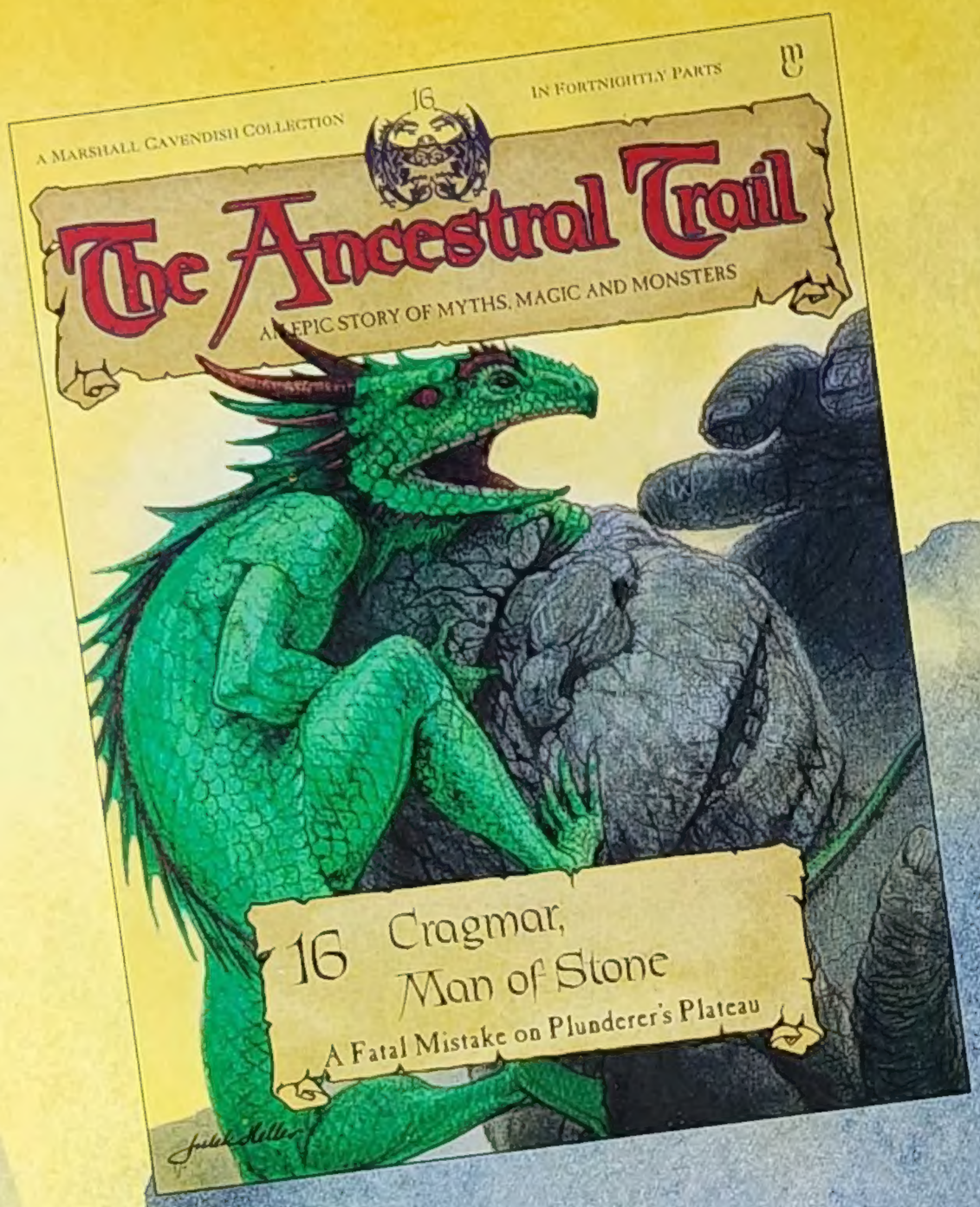
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The Ancestral Trail
An Epic Story of Myths, Magic and Monsters
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A Fatal Mistake on Plunderer's Plateau

In Issue 16

Cragmar, Man of Stone

On Plunderer's Peak the heroes pit their wits against a giant Man of Stone. Will they overcome him and rescue Zard, the fleet-footed Guardian?

plus

- Morbane tells us about two giants who were overcome by wit rather than force.
- The final section of **The Ancestral Trail** role-playing game instructions.

Coming in Issue 17

Gator, Reptile Warrior

Our heroes suffer a double dose of horrors when they enter the Shadow Swamps. How will they fare against blood-sucking leeches and a vicious reptile warrior.

plus

From Morbane – two stories about reptiles that are held in great respect • More pieces for the Ancestral World puzzle map.

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